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**Special edition:  
Recovering from the COVID-19 Pandemic**

# Prisons in pandemic and recovery

*Ed Cornmell is HMPPS Prison Gold Commander in charge of organising prisons to respond to COVID. He is interviewed by Professor Ben Crewe, who is based at Institute of Criminology, University of Cambridge.*

**Ed Cornmell is HMPPS Prison Gold Commander in charge of organising prisons to respond to COVID. Prior to this role, he was Deputy Director of the Long-term and high-security prison estate, and governor of HMP Full Sutton. Ed joined the Prison Service in 2000 as a direct entry administrator and then the Accelerated Promotion Scheme. He has worked in a number of different establishments commencing as a Prison Officer at HMP Leeds. He has previously worked in Private Office and was the Governor of HMP Everthorpe overseeing the merger with HMP Wolds to form HMP Humber.**

The interview took place in November 2021

**BC: How has the pandemic had an impact on the Prison and Probation Service?**

**EC:** I think a fundamental one, really — just so far-reaching. Be it the people residing within prisons, or those people working with them, we've had to almost rip up the rulebook a little bit and look at things afresh to work out how we can focus on some of the very basic challenges of what we can deliver. I would describe it almost like rebooting a computer: we've switched everything off and we're now switching things back on, and it's pretty important that we put the right operating software in.

**BC: Can you say a bit more about the main changes that the service had to make and what you've learned from it?**

**EC:** A huge amount really. The main stuff for me was I think it stripped us back to some of the core fundamentals of when we're at our best: that sense of shared humanity and that real sense of, 'actually, we're all in it together' as colleagues with each other, or with regard to staff-prisoner relationships. I think that fundamental focus on life and preservation of life and that shared humanity and fear, actually, that we've all lived through. I think that certainly drove the first half of the pandemic, and probably elicited the response that we got which was far from expected or anticipated.

The level of restrictions that we've had to apply to manage the risk to life was just huge. Even now when I look back to being part of that decision-making back in March 2020, to expect that we would restrict the system as far as we had to do, and equally just

processing what the information was at the time: the public health advice was that, in a reasonable worst case scenario, around 2,500 to 3,000 people would die within our prison system in England and Wales, staff and prisoners. [That] was just an unbelievable thing to get your head around completely.

**BC: What has it turned out to be so far?**

**EC:** Across staff and prisoners, all terrible tragedies, 198 staff and prisoners have lost their lives in prison; and three YCS staff and 34 prison staff. The reality — whilst all tragedies — across prisoners and staff has been 10 per cent of the reasonable worst case scenario.

**BC: To what do you attribute the fact that those numbers are so much lower than some of the initial predictions?**

**EC:** The reasonable worst case scenario is always with ineffective intervention, that is if we didn't respond and put the right controls in place. I think what it evidences is that we've done the right stuff. And the pain that we've had to live through — and absolutely not minimising the impact on people that the restrictions have had and are still having in many parts of the country — that it's a necessary evil and that we've kept people alive through placing those restrictions in place. We've been agile at putting things in place that we're needing to do, so the testing and the deployment of vaccinations are the same as is happening out in the community, but actually just our way of working, things such as the reverse cohorting and compartmentalisation of staff and prisoners, and infection prevention and control, and the fluid-resistant masks and those kind of mitigations. These are being used out there in the community, but we've had to adapt our way of working within prisons to meet those challenges.

And people complying with that, both those within custody and those working within prisons. Their persistence in following those controls is what's made the difference. People out there working together to do that for their collective good. It's been a superhuman effort from people. The second half of the pandemic involves still having to sustain some of these controls and still being able to function, but to try and move forward as the vaccine levels increase and our ability to

operate more openly increases, but it feels like that fatigue and that kind of weariness, both from a prisoner and staff perspective is now the current challenge.

**BC: And what are the things that have been put in place that you think you'll retain even once the pandemic is over?**

**EC:** From a practical side, we accelerated the use of technology in those early stages of the pandemic: the use of iPads and other things as a short-term intervention, and the expansion of new technology for staff use. So the technology's definitely there to stay, including family video calling, video access to legal advisers, the increasing use of technology for independent adjudications, and the way the parole board have used virtual boards to do their everyday work in terms of release decisions.

Practically, the testing, vaccination, and some of the infection prevention control is really valuable for health and wellbeing within our institutions. So it's really important that we keep that in place because that helps us for all the other pathogens and risks that we've got, and obviously there are other winter risks out there that we manage.

In terms of ways of working within prisons, two bits stand out. One is that relationship between staff and prisoners, and our focus is actually quality over quantity. I appreciate it could be seen as almost a defence of keeping people locked up. But it's far from that, actually. It's that sense of what we got at the beginning of the pandemic, that shared humanity and quality of relationships that we all know is what matters. And at our worst of times, it was those relationships that mattered the most to people, on both sides of that relationship. So it's really now magnifying the role of the key worker as we get that switched on properly. The role of properly personalised contact with an individual in custody is the driving force in some of the work we've got planned within wider prison reform changes — much more personalised, and person-centred. And we're much more focussed on quality and the outcome for the individual, rather than a one-size-fits-all approach, which came out really strongly from engagement from staff and prisoners in what they've experienced. We've talked about the balance of safety and sufficiency. And the feedback says that actually some of the restrictions have allowed

people, staff and prisoners, to feel safer in different kinds of settings. It doesn't mean that small is always beautiful and actually small is a risk to sufficiency in some sites. But perhaps in the past, we've had too big a group [of prisoners on association] and we haven't always had the structure that we need. That's not to take away from the need for recreation and downtime, because that is still vitally important to all of us as human beings. But sometimes our mass association was unstructured time which caused fear for a number of people: inappropriate behaviour, criminality and other things took place. So that sense of a balance between safety and sufficiency in getting the right structure to the day and maximising the time within prisons is one of the things that definitely comes out of this for me, and drives a focus on time-well-spent within prisons as we go forward in developing future regimes.

**BC: Are there any implications in terms of physical design? That is are there any plans to change the way wings are structured so that there are smaller groups, more separation or anything like that?**

**EC:** Yeah, that absolutely features in the safety and sufficiency question, in terms of reviewing people who are out together. It doesn't mean that the answer is small. Because actually we had many successful and quite safe activity delivery

regimes before the pandemic, and we can return to them, and are doing in a number of prisons. But in others it's going to require a different way of working. We've tried to focus on increasing the structure of wing activity, and also thinking through time-in-cell — accepting that we've had to increase time-in-cell through this period — and how we use that time effectively. And technology is a big part of that: a foundation stone for looking again about what happens when somebody is in-cell.

Of course, we want people out of cell and engaged, utilising that time on wing and not having big periods of unstructured activity, but trying to deliver more meaningful interventions, through third sector partners, through peer-led initiatives, and through prisons staff: more of that extracurricular, broader delivery of activity, alongside existing work and employment, education, and interventions. We're trying to do more in that residential setting than we've done before.

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**BC: What sense do you have of the impact both on prisoners and staff of what everyone has gone through in the last 18 months or so?**

**EC:** It's something I consider every day, because every day for the last two years I've been taking recommendations from outbreak control teams, making decisions as to what we can and can't do. I always go back to, 'What does it mean for the prison officer, the duty governor, the prisoner? Actually, what does it mean for the person?' Right now, we've got a lot of people who are fatigued. People are pretty much fed up of what they've had to put up with. That is a shared space. Because of that fatigue and tiredness, it's quite challenging for people to see a future that moves us forward. I'm absolutely alert to that in what we do. But I think there's also a sense of hope. There's an opportunity that we've never had before to start certain things again, to try and reset and refocus and go back to a better place than where we were previously.

**BC: What kinds of things do you think can be reset?**

**EC:** I think there's a whole host of stuff, really. There are the usual challenges of delivery and expectations, and still the same resource envelope to operate within. But we stopped so much. Random drug testing is a good example of it. There's a great deal of consideration of whether that's the best way of detecting and identifying drug misuse and providing that support to people within custody. Is it a punitive thing? Is it a supportive thing? Drug testing is a resource and labour-intensive process that samples a small percentage of the population. And we've resourced that as an area to support substance misuse management and to try to police our prisons. And the question comes, is that right? We have now started to introduce wastewater epidemiology to sample wastewater. We have gone through a pilot. We're hopefully going to launch that in the first 23, 24 prisons with wastewater in place, and that's obviously COVID and infection related. But of course, there's that wider use — an opportunity to do something different.

We've also not mandatory drug tested for a period of time. We need to get back to some kind of metric and measure for this, because that's an expectation upon us to account for what's happening within our prisons. But we could do things differently, and I think it instigates those kinds of conversations. And the regime itself, that is an area where we can look again.

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We are building a project around that to see what else we can take from the pandemic and what else we build back. It's just whether we can exploit the timescale, I suppose, and whether we land in the right place.

**BC: One of the things that a few practitioners have said to me is that they have a bit of anxiety about relatively inexperienced staff who have mainly been socialised into the job during a period where, although it's been very tough in some ways, it certainly hasn't been normal. What is the service doing to mitigate the risk that suddenly you're going to have lots of fairly inexperienced officers dealing with things that they've just not had to deal with for most of their time in service?**

**EC:** Absolutely, we've got a huge focus on that confidence and competence around staff. I absolutely recognise that. In the last two years, with some of the churn that we've seen in some sites, recruitment and retention challenges, and that turnover of workforce, there are many people who've not worked within a full prison regime. This is new stuff, which requires us to take the right, supportive approach to those staff, the right level of guidance, mentoring and support. The work that the Standards Coaching Team have delivered at those sites that really need that injection of experience and additional support, it's been really positive. Focussing on some backlogs we've had around training and development and time for supervision for our staff is one of the competing challenges in this window of fatigued people and 'building back'. We've got to make sure that we've got national expectations, but also a consideration of local circumstance. One size doesn't fit all. We've got people in different starting places, and we've got some really quite challenged prisons out there, with a very high percentage of inexperienced staff, and they're going to take a lot longer to get to where we want them to be. They're going to need an extra injection of mentoring and support, that extra injection of time.

**BC: Is there any concern that there will be some uniformed staff for whom it's actually been quite nice not having to deal with prisoners? Are you getting any sense that there are some establishments where actually getting staff back, re-engaged, getting prisoners out, might be a challenge?**

**EC:** I think there's a balance to it, really. 'Happiness is door-shaped' is a phrase that's thrown around a lot and it's something that is often levelled towards trade unions. I haven't seen that. National trade unions have been really key partners in what we've done over the last two years. There is that sense of prison staff, and prison officers particularly, doing their job and their job is that relationship. I get a lot of feedback from prison officers who joined the service with clear ideals and a desire to do positive, rehabilitative work and a frustration about the ability to get on and do that, asking what can we do to cut transactional work and mundane processes to allow that focus on the quality of relationship. I think that's one of the things that's come out really clearly.

There has been a bit of a deep sigh for some to say, 'Actually, we were on a bit of a hamster wheel before. We've had a chance to take a deep breath. We recognise that things sometimes felt a bit too unsafe, and is there a balance to be had?', hence the structure and the increased level of supervision and that feeling from all people involved in the relationship that we need to get the right balance of safety and sufficiency. So I don't think happiness is door shaped. I think it's trying to find that balance, to give a fulfilling regime for the individual, which doesn't feel overwhelming, and where we've got the control that we need.

**BC: You mentioned that you've engaged a lot with the unions as part of this process. When you were having to make these huge decisions about changes to the way you were running prisons, who else was involved?**

**EC:** Certainly, the partnership with health partners and public health partners has been crucial. We have kept very close to the public health advice, as you would imagine. Every night at 5:30pm, for pretty much the last two years, colleagues have got the feedback from every individual outbreak control team meeting across the country. At a national level, we're very closely engaged with public health colleagues- they're very much part of informing the strategy and the response we've had to take. What we've tried to do, and I think it's worked really well, is look at the relationship between prisons and the centre a little bit more. And, we've changed a few things regarding how we can get that decent feedback loop and get voices heard. There's an increasing desire to increase voice and agency across

both the service users and staff, but actually from a staff and prison governor side of things, that's something we did very early on by using a governor reference group, making sure we established a very clear communication and briefing structure, and translating very complicated and regular changes into guidance.

It's felt quite bureaucratic and heavy at times, because of some of the things we've had to fulfil. But we've kept that communication loop going, and it has been really essential to hear feedback from prisoner councils, staff groups and governors. We desperately want to come out of that formal command mode, because it does sometimes signal that there is a lack of autonomy locally, and that's far from the desire. But that channel of communication has been really

important, just to hear what it is like on the ground and to get feedback on new developments and policy initiatives. But we've equally had the Independent Advisory Forum, who have been a great source of advice, and we've fully utilised the RR3 group of third sector partners, and groups such as family service providers who have helped to inform some of the other wider developments, and external parties as well whenever possible, like the Prison Reform Trust's CAPPTIVE work and other voices out there. So we're really trying to make sure that we listen to all of the very different sources of

information there is. I'm absolutely passionate about making sure that we've got active voice and agency from service users and their families and wider partners. I think there's more we can do. We've got more time for that engagement, and it's making sure that we're open. That openness hopefully fosters that sense of trust and that sense of partnership. But we are absolutely alert to what the feedback is.

**BC: And what has the feedback been like from families, for example, on Purple Visits and in-cell telephony and things like that?**

**EC:** With Purple Visits, there were clearly at times some technological challenges as we rolled out the system. It was described by many people as glitchy But we also had really powerful accounts of the power of being able to talk to a family member who is sat on the sofa and discussing the decorations of their family home in person. That was really, really powerful and really evidenced why that is such a great advance. I think what's really loud and clear is the impact that restrictions had in terms of contacts, and certainly that

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early period where we had to switch off social visits and physical contact itself. That's been the challenge, particularly as, with public health advice, we've introduced now testing to support contact on social visits. We appreciate the impact on family members of having to comply with that to be able to have that basic family physical contact. But again, it's been a really appropriate public health measure to make sure we haven't got the incursion of the virus back into the prison in the way that we test staff as anybody, staff, prisoner or visitor is a risk of transmitting the virus into our prisons from the community. Testing for all is therefore essential to manage this.

There's a question around how do we maintain these things, like the compassionate use of the iPad for the really critical stuff such as attendance at funerals, which was really powerful. Family Video Calling (Purple Visits) was a real big step forward, really significant. The continued rollout of in-cell telephony, it's a basic but, actually, we've still got some prisons that haven't got it. And the mobile PIN phones that we deployed in the early phase again were significant in terms of providing that connection to families, that confidence that loved ones were safe within the prisons at that time. It's building on that, really. It's that challenge of how restrictive regimes are, and whether we are still providing sufficient contact. As we get that vaccine level up and sustain our testing, and we move forward with the pandemic, then the risks around social distancing and contacts drop away, we will be able to physically get more people into visits rooms. Technology's helped to mitigate that, but it's an addition and not a direct replacement for physical contact, which of course, is so important in terms of maintaining those family ties.

**BC: Do you have any sense that public views about imprisonment have changed as a result of the pandemic?**

**EC:** I would shout out to partners and colleagues in The Butler Trust, really, in terms of the work that's been done around Hidden Heroes. That really did make a big difference. We continue to try and make sure that prison staff are recognised alongside other emergency services and other key public service key workers. I think we managed to move some public perception at that time. The sense of the challenge that we faced has been recognised, certainly in the early stages. I think we're going to have to fight quite hard to maintain that and to get due recognition for those people that work within our prisons. Too many comparisons to cruise ships were made at the start of the first wave because of the public perceptions around what was happening with COVID. But I think people understand the challenge that we've had within prisons to try and keep the virus out but also to keep people safe. So I think there has been a good level of recognition for the great work that people have done, but also the great

patience that people in our care have shown with some of our restrictions. That has been a positive. I think there's a challenge for us to keep that recognition there as we move into a more normalised state, and there is still a sense of care and compassion about what's happening within our prisons.

**BC: What have you learnt about contingency planning and responding to extreme events?**

**EC:** I've learnt that actually with a very clear, focused mission — which in this case was to keep people alive and to absolutely focus on safety — that we've got some fantastic people in our system who really will go beyond what you would believe to be achievable to sustain the really important service that we deliver, and show care and compassion to the people we care for. I think that simplicity of mission, and that focus of keeping people alive and safe, and that sense of shared humanity, was probably the most fundamental thing.

**BC: How did it feel to be the main person tasked with getting the service through this unprecedented situation?**

**EC:** These things are a team sport, aren't they? Without a doubt, a team sport. I know I've had a leadership role, and I'm very proud to have led people through what's been a difficult time. I have a few memories along the way. One was travelling in towards London into the command suite and being the only person on the entire East Coast mainline, and the ticket collector came down the train to say, 'There's nobody else on the train. We're going to have a 15-minute delay, just to let you know'. And going into a deserted London and headquarters building, getting quite quickly into some of the depths of the risks that we were facing with the potential loss of life. It was surreal, if I'm perfectly honest. And it took a great deal to stay focussed on the work and to work through really complex and ever-changing circumstances and translate that into a prison setting. So I'm proud of that. I'm proud of trying to provide a level of leadership and support to colleagues but I'm just proud of what people have done.

It has been a team of people who have worked consistently throughout this, and very long hours. As we said at the beginning, all of the deaths we've had are an absolutely tragedy. But I still go back to the 2,500- 3,000 people that could have passed away in our system if we'd have not been effective. I'm proud of what we've achieved by preventing those other deaths. I'm just sorry for the deaths that we have had. But I know the enormous efforts that people have put in. And it's every day, coming across individuals who've just toiled and worked hard, which has been brilliant, both prisoner and staff, to keep their friends, colleagues, and peers going throughout a difficult time. That's why we do the job, really. It's all about the people.